The Prague Summit and *Le Defi Americain*

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The members of the North Atlantic Alliance faced a choice in preparing for their November 2002 Summit in Prague. The easy path would have been to rededicate the Alliance to its original purpose of establishing and maintaining security in Europe and on Europe’s borders. The more challenging path was to commit the Alliance to transforming itself into an organization capable of becoming a strategic player in dealing with the principal threats to international security that have come so sharply into focus since September 11, 2001.

Much recent discussion, especially in the United States, has implied that the first choice would mean that the Alliance had become irrelevant to the world of the early twenty-first century. This is surely an overstatement. The European security agenda contains at least four sets of issues of great importance: a) the integration of Russia, Ukraine, Belarus, and Moldova into the European security framework as stable, democratic and open societies; b) the definitive resolution of the Balkan crises and the inclusion of Balkan countries into the Alliance and the European Union; c) the resolution of the problems in the South Caucasus, including presumably the eventual accession of Armenia, Georgia and, should it eventually both wish and qualify for membership, Azerbaijan; and d) the establishment of a wider zone of stability on NATO’s Central Asian and Mediterranean flanks.

Whatever other commitments NATO may take on, this full and complex European agenda must be managed if the Allies wish to consolidate their success in ending the Cold War on Western terms. For this reason alone, it is probably a mistake to suppose that the United States would lose interest in the Alliance if it decided to concentrate on this agenda, as influential voices on both sides of the Atlantic have urged. But an Alliance that contented itself with this choice would assuredly cease to have the leading strategic position that it held in the second half of the twentieth century.

By the spring 2002 ministerial meetings in Reykjavik there was already a substantial consensus to move toward the more challenging option. The results of the Prague Summit confirmed this inclination. The agreement to create a NATO Response Force (NRF) and to reorganize the Alliance’s command structure along the lines proposed by the United States has two important consequences. It promises the emergence of a true Allied capability to intervene and protect security on a global basis. And it paves the way for a NATO-EU relationship in the defense sphere that will facilitate the development of the European Rapid Reaction Force, toward which progress seemed to have slowed in recent months. The Prague Capabilities Commitments (PCC) represent a scaled down, but practical and affordable approach to the much discussed, and probably overrated, transatlantic “capabilities gap.” And the statement on Iraq that was issued at Prague signaled the possibility of further steps toward repairing the considerable damage to Allied relationships that the Iraq problem has caused for many months.

The challenge for the next year or more is to realize the promise of these achievements of the Prague Summit. Commitments such as those undertaken in Prague have not always been implemented in the past – as the example of the Defense Capabilities Initiative and some other elements of the 1999 Washington Summit declaration clearly show. If the Prague Commitments are implemented, however, the specter of US loss of interest in the Alliance should begin to disappear.

Such was surely the message of the important speech that US President Bush delivered at the opening session of the Prague Atlantic Student Summit (PASS) the day before the North
Atlantic Council met. The President made clear that the United States had no wish – or intent – to distance itself from an Alliance willing to play a significant strategic role in meeting the major security challenges of the future. He also endorsed the compatibility of the transformation of NATO along the lines foreshadowed at Prague and the European Union’s desire to develop a stronger common foreign and security policy backed by a new military capability. The fact that the Prague initiatives in the field of Allied military capabilities were conceived and developed by Donald Rumsfeld’s Pentagon should help lay to rest any concern in Europe that the Bush administration’s hardliners cannot be expected to build on the momentum imparted to the Alliance in Prague.

The initiative now lies primarily with the major European governments. The commitment of the countries invited to join the Alliance in Prague to continuing the process of military reform that they have already undertaken and to look for ways in which they can contribute, within the limits of their economic means and in conformity with the Prague Capabilities Commitments, to the Alliance and to activation of the NRF, is much less in question than the intentions of the old members. Those intentions are still not altogether clear.

For example, is France now prepared in practice as well as in principle to see the Alliance act in a timely and effective manner to deal with threats outside Europe? Is Germany, mired as it is in economic stagnation and constrained by a domestic opinion whose caution about extra-European commitments was clear during its recent elections, willing to make the economic sacrifices necessary to bring its defense program in line with the minimum level expected of all the Allies and the political commitments needed to enable it to play an effective role in an Alliance with global interests? Can the debilitating divisions among the key members of the European Union on critical security issues, notably affecting the Near East and the Gulf, be managed so that the EU can realize the goal of a serious common foreign and security policy?

The answers to these questions are unlikely to emerge for several months. But these answers will determine whether the Prague Summit was indeed a historic turning point for the Alliance or merely another in a succession of false dawns that the Alliance has known. If they are negative, the Alliance will gradually lose its dynamic and revert to its historic role as the principal custodian of the European security agenda. This is not a trivial role. As already outlined, there are major issues to be tackled in Europe. An organization that managed to resolve them would make a worthy contribution to international peace and security. But it would be the executor of a legacy, not the initiator of a new international security order.

From a US point of view, there is no doubt which would be the better course, whatever reservations there may be among some in Washington about the wisdom of the policies that President Bush, Secretary of State Powell and Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld pursued at Prague. As President Bush said in his speech to PASS on 20 November, “we’re committed to a close and permanent partnership with the nations of Europe. […] America and the strong democracies of Europe need each other, each playing our full and responsible role. The good we can do together is far greater than the good we can do apart. […] In this hour of challenge, NATO will do what it has done before: We will stand firm against the enemies of freedom and we’ll prevail.”

Some Europeans may question the sincerity of US statements along these lines. But such skepticism risks becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy. Europeans cannot expect the Bush administration to stand indefinitely on the reassurances and commitments that it has recently given about its willingness to work toward an Alliance that has a central strategic role in the future if it continues to encounter European reluctance to accept its sincerity.

The challenge to those in Europe who take US statements substantially at face value is to convince their more skeptical colleagues that they are right. No country faces this challenge
more clearly than Britain and no issue will more sorely test transatlantic harmony than Iraq. The challenge of fully implementing the Prague Summit’s Commitments and its fragile consensus on Iraq will be a decisive test of Britain’s longstanding goal of acting as the bridge between the United States and the European continent in security matters. Here, too, there is a great question mark over the future. The tensions of recent weeks between Britain on the one hand and France and Germany on the other are not an encouraging portent of what UK Prime Minister Blair will be able to achieve along these lines.

To say this is not to assert that US policy preferences must be adopted in every detail. Surely there is room for serious transatlantic dialogue of a kind that has been sorely lacking, at least until very recently, about the priorities and approaches that can best achieve US and European goals in both Europe and the Middle East. But distinguishing between a good faith effort by the Allies on both sides of the Atlantic to implement the Prague consensus on NATO’s transformation and on Iraq cooperatively, and an attempt, however stealthy, to delay its implementation or to water it down significantly will not be difficult. History’s judgment of the Prague Summit will depend on which course the Allies take.

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